Research Article

Re/formulating Ethical Issues for Visual Research Methods from the Ground Up

Jenny Waycott*
University of Melbourne

Marilys Guillemin
University of Melbourne

Susan M. Cox
University of British Columbia

Deborah Warr
University of Melbourne

Sarah Drew
University of Melbourne

Catherine Howell
Flinders University

**jwaycott@unimelb.edu.au*

Visual Methodologies: http://journals.sfu.ca/vm/index.php/vm/index

Research Article

ABSTRACT

This paper presents six categories of key ethical issues that are important for researchers to consider when using visual methods in social research. The categories were identified during workshop discussions with researchers working across a range of disciplines and using various forms of visual methods. The categories encompass both familiar and emerging ethical challenges, including widely accepted strategies for meeting ethical obligations to ensure participants' informed consent, to maintain confidentiality, and to design and conduct research that minimizes harm. Three further categories represent more novel ethical issues that are particularly prominent in visual methods: managing fuzzy boundaries around the multiple purposes that visual research may serve, addressing questions of authorship and ownership of visual products generated during research, and dealing with representation and audiences when disseminating research findings. In this paper we reflect on the tensions these issues raise for visual researchers and consider potential strategies to address these challenges. By providing practical, grounded examples of issues that researchers have grappled with when using various visual research techniques we contribute to a growing discourse regarding ethics in the practice of visual research. This differs from the top-down approach that often drives the development of ethical guidelines. While many existing debates focus on specific methods, projects, or research disciplines, this paper adopts a broad lens to identify and critically assess ethical challenges that confront visual researchers working across disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords: ethics; visual methods; participatory research; sensitive research

ISSN: 2040-5456

Ethics in Visual Research: An Evolving Debate

Visual techniques have been expanding the methodological repertoire of the social sciences since the 1940s, when photography first became an important tool in ethnographic research (as used, for example, in Bateson & Mead's 1942 study, Balinese Character). Since then, visual research has grown and crossed disciplinary boundaries. Visual methods that were previously prominent in anthropology and sociology have been adapted for use in disciplines as diverse as geography, cultural studies, health studies, psychology, urban studies, design, art research, and performance studies. With visual methods evolving and expanding, it is timely to revisit the debate about ethics in visual research.

Rose (2014) explored the expansion of visual methods over recent years and catalogued the many types of visual data that are being generated. These include the use of still and video cameras to collect images of research participants and activities; the generation of visual material (for example, photographs, drawings, and artwork) by participants; and the analysis of 'found' or pre-existing visual material, such as photographic archives or YouTube videos. Given the diversity of methods that fall under the 'visual research' umbrella, and the varied purposes to which these methods might be put, it is not surprising that there is considerable concern about how to ensure that visual research aligns with the core principles that govern ethical research, such as respect, justice, and beneficence (Clark, 2012; Pink, 2011; Prosser et al., 2008; Rose, 2012; Wiles et al., 2008).

Concerns about ethics in visual research are exacerbated by advances in digital technologies, which provide opportunities for researchers to use novel methods to investigate social issues but also introduce new challenges for researchers to navigate. Widespread access to digital technologies is arguably amplifying the significance of visual communication in everyday social and cultural practice; this is attracting the interest of social researchers concerned with understanding the implications of visual information-sharing for personal and social life (Bartmanski, 2014; Graham, Laurier, O'Brien, & Rouncefield, 2011; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015; Van House, 2011). Emerging fields such as internet-based visual research and geospatial mapping offer exciting potential to understand social worlds, but bring to the fore new ethical considerations. For instance, technological developments now include small portable cameras that can be worn around the neck and automatically capture images every five seconds. Such devices are being used for research in health, urban studies and sports science and are heralded as 'allow[ing] researchers to see aspects of participants' lives they might otherwise not gain insight or access to' (Kelly et al., 2013, p. 315). Automatic image capture introduces an unprecedented potential for the surveillance of research participants (and others). Kelly and colleagues (2013) note this method raises the risk that participants may inadvertently take photographs of themselves or their surroundings that breach ethical principles (for example, photographing people in a state of undress) or are subject to legal intervention (for example, capturing images that reveal illegal activity). These challenges suggest that innovative visual methods and research ethics are not always well aligned. However, Langmann and Pick (2014) demonstrate that new technologies – specifically, smartphones with embedded cameras – provide an opportunity to expand ethical practice by enabling researchers to consult with participants about whether/what/how to capture images in context (Langmann & Pick 2014). Using digital cameras, participants can review each image on the spot and decide in consultation with the researcher whether the image should be deleted or used as research data.

A growing body of work aims to discuss, understand, and respond to ethical issues in visual research (Gubrium and Harper, 2013; Clark, 2012; Pink, 2011; Prosser et al., 2008; Rose, 2012; Wiles et al., 2008). Core arguments in these discussions include if and how anonymity should be preserved when research participants are represented in visual data such as photographs. Although anonymity is a standard requirement for research ethics, it is often difficult or inappropriate to blur images or impossible to completely de-identify participants without losing the richness and authenticity of the data (Jordan, 2014; Nutbrown, 2010; Prosser et al., 2008; Wiles et al., 2008). Jordan (2014) argues that 'image manipulation' (for example, anonymizing participants by pixelating photographs) is in conflict with research integrity, or presenting results 'accurately, honestly, and completely' (Jordan, 2014, p. 441). This builds on Nutbrown's (2010) essay, which persuasively argues that blurring images may be disempowering for participants such as young children whose rich expressions as they engage in play-based learning can only be truly conveyed visually.

Other concerns raised in this literature include the need to be mindful of treating participants with respect when engaging with them in visual research. This includes making considered decisions about when and how to take photographs or video recordings of participants (Langmann & Pick, 2014; Puurveen, Phinney, Cox & Purves, this issue) and being careful about disseminating visual material. Caution is required even when the material has been created by participants themselves, especially if there is a danger that participants might be exposed to stigma because of the sensitive nature of the visual material (Bombard, Cox & Semaka, 2011; Gubrium, Hill & Flicker, 2014). Langmann and Pick (2014) argue that researchers must ensure the dignity of participants while recognizing that this depends on the cultural context of the research. They illustrate the issue of 'dignity-in-context' by explaining their decisions about who and what to photograph in a study exploring poverty reduction and community building strategies in India. For example, they chose not to photograph a homeless man, even though this would have been an evocative image because the image would likely evoke pity rather than respect and sensationalize problems of homelessness, thereby threatening the man's dignity.

These and other reflections (see Gubrium et al., 2014; Jordan, 2014; Nutbrown, 2010) provide useful resources for researchers who want to learn how to do visual research in an ethical manner. In addition, researchers can refer to general codes of practice, such as the Australian National Statement on ethical conduct in human research (National Statement, 2007) or the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement (2014), and the codes of ethics for relevant professional associations, such as the Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association (British Sociological Association, 2006). Not

ISSN: 2040-5456

surprisingly, the most useful resources for guiding ethical visual research are those produced by the specific visual research professional associations. The International Visual Sociology Association (IVSA)'s Code of Research Ethics and Guidelines (Papademas & IVSA, 2009) sets out general principles followed by ten statements of ethical standards the IVSA expects of visual researchers. This code has been a key document in the development of ethical standards for visual researchers. Other useful resources include a review by Wiles and colleagues (Wiles et al., 2008), which outlined key ethical issues for researchers using visual methods. Focusing on the use of photographs, film and video images as research data, the review included practical examples from visual research projects to illustrate critical ethical issues.

While these guidelines and discussions are useful resources, they need to be constantly updated in order to keep pace with the proliferation of novel visual methods and technologies. Furthermore, they are designed for researchers in specific disciplines and may be inaccessible, or of limited value, to those working in other fields. This is a common limitation for discussions about ethics in visual research, which are typically grounded in a specific disciplinary context, refer to a specific kind of visual research, or describe unique encounters that researchers have faced during a specific research project. For example, Nutbrown's (2010) article refers to education research, Gubrium et al (2014) describe issues faced in participatory digital storytelling projects, and Langmann and Pick (2014) relate the dilemmas encountered during an ethnographic study conducted in particular regions of India. Indeed, the articles included in this special issue largely consist of reflections about ethical issues encountered in specific projects. These discussions – personal reflections by visual researchers who have grappled with real ethical issues – provide valuable insights and lessons that other researchers can learn from. However, their reach and relevance may be limited for those working outside of the specific contexts in which the discussions are grounded.

A further limitation is that existing guidelines and resources typically aim to educate researchers about ethical practice when using visual methods, with limited attention given to how guidelines could benefit members of institutional research ethics committees, who have the task of reviewing and approving visual research projects. Some researchers have expressed concern about the over-zealous role research ethics committees can play when evaluating visual research (Cox et al., 2014). That is, projects employing visual methods may be more likely to be scrutinized and less likely to be approved than other more conventional discursive and text-based methods, such as interviews and questionnaires. Alternatively, a lack of understanding about the particularities of visual research methods could lead to projects being approved that should not be, or research ethics committees recommending customary strategies for addressing ethical risks that are potentially problematic or unrealistic when applied to research using visual methods. An example is the expectation that visual data can and should always be anonymized (see Tilley and Woodthorpe 2011).

Conducting ethical research means more than just gaining approval for a project from a research ethics committee. Of course, this approval process (or 'procedural ethics') is important for ensuring that research is designed to adhere to core ethical principles and incorporates strategies that address anticipated concerns (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). However, researchers must also recognize and respond to ethical issues that emerge in the process of conducting research. This is particularly important when conducting qualitative research or fieldwork that involves interacting with people. Social interactions can be unpredictable; ethical issues that emerge in the doing of research, therefore, cannot always be predicted and planned for. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) used the term 'ethics in practice' to describe these highly contextualized and emergent ethical issues; others have used the term 'situated ethics' (e.g., Gubrium et al., 2014). Regardless of the terminology used, there is a consistent argument that ethical issues must be considered at all stages of the research process: from designing research, recruiting participants, collecting data, to analysing and disseminating findings. In addition, there is considerable overlap between ethical and methodological challenges. It is difficult to talk about one without mentioning the other – hence, discussions of visual methods often include reference to ethical issues.

In this paper, we address issues of 'procedural ethics' and 'ethics in practice' that are relevant across visual research methods and disciplinary fields. We highlight how the particular characteristics of visual methods, and their common use in sensitive research settings, brings to the surface a range of ethical dilemmas, where there is often no clear 'right' or 'wrong' response. In these circumstances, flexibility in practice – or the ability to adapt the research protocol in response to situated ethics – is crucial. Our aim in presenting these issues is not to provide stringent recommendations about how to conduct ethical visual research, but rather to report on the challenges that visual researchers themselves identify in order to prompt reflection and encourage researchers to consider strategies for addressing the varied challenges that can arise when using visual methods in social research. The following discussion draws on material gathered through a series of workshops that were convened to explore emerging ethical issues with researchers using visual methods.

Methodology

We sought to identify emergent ethical issues and practices that researchers had encountered during recent fieldwork. To facilitate in-depth exploration and reflection we conducted extensive consultations. This included convening two workshops that brought together international researchers. The first involved 15 researchers from a range of disciplines who participated in person and via Skype. Members of the project team were active participants in the workshop alongside invited attendees. We used this as an opportunity to reflect on our own experiences of using visual methods in our diverse research endeavours. Prior to the workshop, all the participants were asked to submit discussion papers addressing the following questions: What counts as ethical issues for you in relation to visual methodologies? What ethical issues in visual research have you encountered that you believe you have adequately addressed? What ethical issues in visual research still make you feel uncomfortable and remain unresolved? Written responses were coded for themes and preliminary findings were subsequently presented and discussed at a workshop convened at the International Visual Methods Conference in Wellington, New Zealand, in 2013. The discussion papers, workshop discussions, and

ISSN: 2040-5456

analysis informed the development of draft guidelines that were circulated to a wide range of international researchers as well as members of research ethics committees (Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the United States and Research Ethics Boards in Canada) for comment and feedback (Cox et al., 2014; Howell et al., 2015).

Through this process we identified six categories of ethical issues that are particularly relevant to visual research methods: 1) informed consent, 2) confidentiality, 3) minimizing harm, 4) fuzzy boundaries, 5) authorship and ownership, and 6) representation and audience. The categories refer to both familiar and novel issues that, while not unique to visual research methods, are reformulated in response to the circumstances and contingencies of visual methods and address issues that are particularly likely to surface in visual and other novel arts-based methods (Cox and Boydell, 2015).

Six categories of ethical issues in visual research

In this section we discuss the six categories of ethical issues, using quotes from the workshop position papers and reference to the relevant literature, to illustrate the issues. The first three categories – consent, confidentiality, and minimizing harm – represent critical concerns for all researchers that manifest in particular ways in visual research. Our workshop discussions revealed that visual research also brings to light challenges in managing boundaries around the research, deciding questions of authorship and ownership, and taking into account the effects of representation and audience responses when disseminating research findings. Although there is some overlap between these categories, they provide a useful basis for understanding ethical considerations when conducting visual research.

Consent

A key ethical principle underlying all human research is respect, and a fundamental application of respect is to ensure participants can make informed decisions about their research participation. Participants should have sufficient information about, and adequate understanding of, the purpose of the research, including information about what is required, what will happen to the data, and any risks that participation might pose.

A prominent issue for contemporary research is managing consent when using visual material that is publicly available on the Internet. Researchers are now using images and videos that have been posted to social media sites to investigate complex and sensitive social issues. For example, Gibbs and colleagues (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen & Carter, 2015) examined how social media is changing practices around death and memorialization by analysing images posted to Instagram with the hashtag 'funeral'. Similarly, Liu and colleagues (Liu et al., 2013) demonstrated that social media offers new avenues of expression and social connection for people experiencing chronic illness, through their analysis of 'health vlogs' on YouTube. These studies demonstrate that user-created content on the Internet can be a valuable source of research data. However, even if this content is readily accessible for researchers, it is important to consider the contexts in which it was created and the intended audiences (Henderson, Johnson, & Auld, 2013).

This issue was raised by a participant at our workshop[1]:

> *The issue that I am currently considering relates to analysing YouTube video material in research, which I recently did (with colleagues) when studying videos posted by users of online genetic testing services […] Do we consider these videos as interactions with individuals, or as texts? This obviously has ethical implications. We decided to treat the videos as public textual resources, studying the audio/visual material of the video, as well as the surrounding online visual and written content […] After much deliberation, at this stage we have not contacted the YouTubers about their videos (for consent or for interviews), considering our analytical approach and also the large size of the online community, the easy access to the videos (no password required) and the ethos of the site, which is to "Broadcast Yourself". Was this the right approach? I am still not sure.*

As this quote demonstrates, it is not always clear whether researchers should obtain informed consent to use visual material that is publicly accessible. Despite the availability of material posted on social media, researchers are ethically bound to treat such images with due care and to consider carefully whether they should attempt to establish consent or to use the material at all. However, it may not always be feasible or practical to obtain consent, especially when using large datasets or archival material, such as historic photographs.

A contrasting dilemma arises when participatory methods (such as Photovoice) are used to generate visual artefacts for multiple purposes. In this case, researchers need to pay careful attention to whether participants understand what they are consenting to. Visual data are sometimes generated alongside other forms of data, such as text, and may be created using various creative processes that can be enchanting for participants, researchers and other stakeholders (Vannini, 2015). These expectations of creativity, however, may be experienced as a burden for participants (see Nansen et al., this issue).

Participant creativity complicates matters of consent if it is not clear what constitutes research 'data'. Participants may have difficulty understanding how the different processes in the project are connected and which forms of data they are consenting to being used for analysis and dissemination. For participatory visual research that is conducted over a period of time, or with specific cultural groups, informed consent may need to be continually renegotiated. This issue was particularly prominent for one of our workshop attendees, who conducts research with Australian Indigenous communities2. She described the processes followed to develop strong collaborative partnerships with the community and to ensure these partnerships were maintained throughout the research process:

> *As a collaborative researcher working with the Aboriginal community, using visual research methods involves incorporating broad consultative processes with the Aboriginal community to ensure that the use of images in research is acknowledged and the appropriate community(ies) and individuals concerned*

ISSN: 2040-5456

> *have granted permissions for their use, particularly those that include culturally sensitive images […] Ongoing negotiations and relationships with community members and project participants are necessary. This includes understanding cultural protocols, i.e., who may/may not provide permission for certain images.*

Informed consent may need to be negotiated as projects unfold over time, at the stages of data collection, data analysis, data reporting, and community engagement. Researchers may need to seek consent from participants to use visual products for dissemination activities, such as research reports or curating images for exhibition, only after participants have had the opportunity to see how the materials are to be used.

Another important issue for visual researchers to consider is whether consent should be obtained from third parties who inadvertently appear in images used as visual data. From a legal perspective, in most countries there are no legal requirements to seek formal consent from individuals who happen to appear in photographs, videos or films, if the images are not to be used for commercial purposes. From an ethical perspective, however, these issues are not so clear-cut. It is usually desirable to obtain permission from third parties who appear in photographs, videos, or films that are created during research. Ethics committees may ask researchers to have strategies in place to obtain this consent. In some settings, such as research conducted in participants' homes or in public places, boundaries around participation and third party consent will inevitably be blurred. It may be necessary for all members of a family or group to consent to participate in a research project although this does not solve issues of visitors and others entering into settings during the research. The latter is illustrated in the following example discussed in the workshop that came from a project that explored how communication technologies can be used to alleviate older adults' experiences of social isolation[3]. Participants used a specially developed iPad application to create, share, and view photographs but because they used the application in their own homes, it was difficult to ensure that only those who had consented to the research appeared in the photographs and viewed the images:

> *We could not control viewing of [research] content within participants' homes. Visiting family members and friends may have viewed the display with participants. In addition, some participants shared photographs of other people. These experiences raise questions about informed consent and the boundaries of participation in the project.*

A common response to issues of capturing images of third parties has been to advise participants to avoid taking photographs or videos of other people. However, this can be overly prescriptive and can be incompatible with the aims of the research, potentially distorting how participants are able to represent issues. Another strategy is to provide participants with protocols that guide them to compose photographs in ways that avoid identifying individuals and to ask permission when taking photographs of others.

Confidentiality

A key principle of ethical research is protecting research participants' confidentiality. It is important here to differentiate between the ethical value of confidentiality and the legal concept of privacy. Privacy legislation focuses on data protection and controlling the uses that government and private sector organizations can make of personal information.

Confidentiality involves protecting participants' identities and honoring the relationship of trust between participants and researchers. In research settings, upholding confidentiality is typically interpreted as protecting (and anonymizing) participants' identities when reporting research findings.

When using standard research methods, participants' confidentiality is usually protected using relatively straightforward strategies such as de-identifying data, using pseudonyms to refer to participants, and removing potentially identifying details from interview transcripts. When reporting visual data, other kinds of strategies may be required. Methods using digital cameras are noteworthy here, as they can capture detailed representations of individuals in which research participants, researchers, and third parties can be readily recognized. Moreover, images created using digital cameras can be easily replicated and shared. Technological advances mean that images may be linked to automated facial recognition capacities. Global information systems (GIS) and global positioning systems (GPS) provide additional contextual information that can be used to identify digital image files and their contents (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015). These concerns were noted by one workshop participant who used GIS technology to investigate relationships between built environments and health[4]:

> *Combining visual methods and geospatial methods adds information about location. Therefore any ethical issues with visual methods alone still hold, yet have the added complexity of issues associated with also identifying where people were/are/might be. So, for geospatial researchers privacy is the main ethical issue we consider […]. A strength of GIS lies in its power to communicate visually – a picture is worth a thousand words – yet, GIS and maps reveal location. There is often a tension between communicating results better with maps and maintaining participant privacy.*

In other contexts, such as research aiming to have empowering and emancipatory outcomes for participants, efforts to protect confidentiality may, in fact, be unethical. For example, digital storytelling projects often explicitly aim to give participants a voice and represent subjective perspectives (Gubrium et al., 2014). In these circumstances, it may be disrespectful to obscure participants' identity; this can conflict with the aims of the research to 'empower' and 'give voice'.

Issues of confidentiality need to be carefully considered in arts-based research where there are explicit aims to create visual artefacts that are meaningful to participants or that engage the public in the issues that are explored. In these projects, participants may be personally invested in creating meaningful artefacts; furthermore, they may engage in the process over an extended period of time, and may wish to be acknowledged for the visual products they have created. One workshop participant faced this issue in the context of research examining the use of digital technologies for commemorative

ISSN: 2040-5456

purposes[5]. Participants in his research included artists who lived in communities that were affected by a catastrophic fire that occurred in Victoria, Australia, in 2009. The researcher encountered ethical tensions in:

> *[respecting] the rights of the artists who, on the one hand, are informants […] needing to have their confidentiality respected, but [who] also need to have any of their art works attributed appropriately.*

It may be unethical to attempt to anonymize participants in ways (or settings) that are highly likely to be ineffective (Nespor, 2000). For example, in some research projects conducted in community settings, visual artefacts will be disseminated in the communities in which they were created. In these circumstances, alternative strategies are required to minimize potential risks associated with participants being identified. As with other research methods, such as focus group discussions, researchers will need to explain that they cannot guarantee participants' anonymity. In research where participants create visual products and artefacts in groups, researchers need to develop strategies that address issues of participants' anonymity. In some cases this may mean ensuring that participants do not share highly personal or sensitive information about themselves. If participants choose to do so, however, participants can be encouraged to discuss the potential consequences, so that they are aware of the ramifications of sharing personal information.

Minimizing harm

A key ethical consideration for all research is to prevent or minimize harm to participants, while maximizing the potential benefits. Visual methods can be used to explore personal experiences in revealing ways, particularly when participants create visual products. Photo elicitation methods, for instance, offer researchers access to intimate spaces that would not normally be shared in other forms of research, and can generate rich and highly personal imagery (Phelan & Kinsella, 2013). There is a risk, however, that participants may subsequently come to regret sharing personal information. They may feel exposed in ways they did not anticipate, potentially leading to discomfort or emotional distress.

When participants engage in creative activity, such as visual storytelling, they can be vulnerable to being misunderstood or judged in negative ways, particularly when the products of their creativity are shared with an external and unknown audience. This challenge can be exacerbated when visual methods are used for research involving marginalized and vulnerable populations. In the project involving socially isolated older adults, participants differed in their approach to these issues:

> *Most participants have found it challenging to think of things to photograph that they thought others would be interested in. Some participants were very careful in only sharing images and information that they considered to be 'safe' (for example, pictures of the garden), while others shared more personal information.*

Another potential harm is the evocation of unpleasant memories and negative emotions that might be uncovered when participants create personally meaningful visual material. For example, reconstructing stories on sensitive topics, particularly through evocative imagery, presents risks of participants reliving traumatic events (Gubrium et al, 2014). In these research contexts, the emotional impact of visual research applies equally to researchers, particularly when processes of data generation involve extended periods of interactive and collaborative engagement (Warr 2004) which may be amplified for researchers using visual methods (see McLeod and Guillemin, this issue). For people who have experienced traumatic events, research offers opportunities to reflect on these experiences and to foster constructive responses even though it may also risk exacerbating distress. For example, the workshop participant who was researching the use of digital memorials to commemorate disasters faced a tension between exploring the commemorative potential of new technologies and not exposing participants to unnecessary harm:

> *In commemorating the deceased, a conceivable use of technology is to present images of the deceased whilst they were alive, back to the bereaved as a way to remember and reflect on the lives that were lost […] However, there are ethical concerns surrounding whether bereaved community members might find these images too confronting.*

Visual research can involve extended contact between participants and researchers, either producing in-depth and detailed insights into participants' situations or collaborating to create aesthetic commentaries on personal and social experiences. In any research that involves working closely with participants over time, issues of how to exit the research field must be carefully considered to avoid potential negative impacts (Waycott et al, 2015). Contact between researchers and participants can be emotionally intense, particularly when participants invest time and intellectual energy to create visual artefacts. In some research settings, participants may previously have had few opportunities to share their experiences and views with others. For these participants, the end of a research project may be associated with feelings of disappointment and a renewed awareness of feelings of loneliness or powerlessness. These issues were noted by a workshop participant involved in 'art/research' projects in neighborhood settings where many residents experienced social marginalization linked to circumstances of unemployment, poverty, and difficult family and personal situations:

> *Arts-based approaches can be successful in building trust and rapport and are likely to involve contact with researchers, which over time contributes to a deeper sense of engagement with projects and personnel. For example, participants have expressed desire to continue meeting the researcher once the planned research encounters were completed. Careful explanation at the outset of the parameters of the project (e.g., the project involves getting together one/two or three times) is very important to avoid making participants feel like they are being 'abandoned' by a researcher. However, for some projects it is not always possible to say in advance what is involved and participants may feel they have built relationships with researchers that they are keen to maintain.*

ISSN: 2040-5456

Visual methods can facilitate an emotionally heightened involvement in research, which presents risks of emotional harm. These risks should not deter researchers from exploring the value of visual methods, but they do need to be carefully considered and planned for. Planning for exiting the field is critical. Researchers could, for example, engage appropriate local partners in projects to promote the sustainability of project outcomes and the social and personal impacts of the research (Waycott et al, 2015).

Fuzzy boundaries

In visual research projects, clear demarcations between the roles of researchers, participants, artists, and others may dissolve. Visual methods are sometimes used to achieve multiple purposes, such as research, advocacy, and community engagement. Gubrium and colleagues introduced the term "fuzzy boundaries" to describe blurring between multiple purposes and roles in visual research (Gubrium et al., 2014). In our workshop discussions we encountered two key issues for managing fuzzy boundaries: navigating roles in projects involving populations experiencing socio-economic disadvantage; and interweaving research with creative processes and objectives.

Visual methods are commonly used in research with people experiencing the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage and marginalization. In these settings, researchers are confronted with participants' pressing needs for material and social support and may need to step outside their roles in order to provide necessary support. One workshop participant noted that in her research with disadvantaged communities she commonly prioritized practical support for participants before addressing the goals of the research:

> *Researchers working closely with communities can be overwhelmed by the ongoing needs of residents who are constantly trying to get by with limited resources. Researchers can be an important source of information and referral and these (necessary) demands need to be addressed before residents can focus on arts or social activities. Putting research needs before residents' needs for managing the exigencies of everyday life is unethical when their needs are so evident.*

Visual research projects conducted in public settings, such as community venues or housing estates, challenge perceptions of what constitutes participation. Notions of participation stretch from deliberate involvement through to being coincidentally present at research events. In such settings, researchers must keep in mind that communities are complex entities and participants will respond to activities in varying ways. These issues were evident in an incident recounted by one of our workshop participants. The incident occurred during an arts-based community research project based in a housing estate which aimed to promote local safety and social inclusion. The artist/researcher had to intervene when tensions between residents erupted after one resident complained about the noise being generated by the children involved in the activities. Some participants were concerned that this might cause the project to be abandoned and so they confronted the complainant. With emotions running high, the situation quickly deteriorated into a physical altercation. This example points to the complex personal and social situations that can be exposed during participatory visual research projects.

Conducting visual research in community settings requires considerable communication skills, commitment to reflexive practice, and appropriate and timely support from social support services.

In research where participants actively create visual artefacts, there can be fuzzy boundaries around the purpose of the activity. Creative processes can be used by individuals to express and explore personal experiences; they can be used in collaborative projects to explore shared experiences, or they may be used to understand the impact of creative processes. Roles can be particularly fuzzy for artist-researchers when the project aims to generate both artistic and research outcomes. Artist-researchers need to represent data in ways that reflect robust processes of data analysis and interpretation and in ways that are aesthetically compelling. The potential tensions in this dual role were articulated by one workshop participant who was working with choreographers for a project that used dance to explore young people's experience of psychosis[6]:

> *How much discretion should be given to artists to select which research messages they will convey? What if artists focus only on aspects that can be easily dramatized? […] The experience of creating a dance to depict pathways to care for young people experiencing early psychosis highlighted the ongoing adjustments made as the choreography was scripted and the ensuing interactions emerged between the creative and research teams. The struggle between the content and the aesthetic qualities of the dance was paramount in this process […] I questioned what might have been sacrificed for the sake of performance and the choreographer questioned what might have been sacrificed for the sake of research.*

Similar tensions surface when visual methods use participatory and creative strategies to promote advocacy or to foster social transformation. In these projects, the aims of research and political impacts are blurred. An artist-researcher participating in the workshop explained her practice in the following way:

> *This research seeks not only to take account of people's lived experiences, but also to affect their lives in meaningful ways and advocate their interests to the broader society. Larger social change can be accomplished through the collaborative art works or participation in political and policy discussion*.

These aims are laudable and important, but require careful understanding of the implications when roles and objectives are dissolved. Consideration needs to be given to the multiple purposes the visual products can hold for different people involved in the project, which has implications for disseminating visual products in ethical ways. If participants create visual products during the research process, these products can hold personal meaning for the participants that are not shared or recognized by the research team. There are overlaps here with the issue of ownership: who owns the visual products created during the project, and who decides how they are to be used and represented? Researchers must clearly articulate and plan for these multiple perspectives and fuzzy boundaries while recognizing that such plans must evolve to ensure they are appropriate

ISSN: 2040-5456

and specific to the particular context in which the project is conducted.

Authorship and ownership

Visual researchers face important questions about authorship and ownership of visual products generated during the research, particularly if the products are co-created. Visual methods can involve significant levels of contribution from participants. To build and sustain strong partnerships between participants and researchers, authorship of data and artefacts generated during the research should be appropriately acknowledged. However, as noted above, acknowledging authorship can conflict with efforts to maintain confidentiality. One workshop participant noted that processes of determining authorship are particularly difficult when outputs are co-created by participants, researchers and artists:

> *What are ethical practices related to collaborative authorship or best practices when deciding who takes the lead in creating different kinds of project outcomes? Who ultimately 'owns' the work? What are the authorship/ ownership issues encountered in the use of various art genres? Have participants consented to the use of interview material by artists to create an artistic piece?*

Issues of ownership are pertinent in relation to the storage and long-term display of visual products. This can be problematic for projects that produce substantial artistic works. For example, if a community group generates large paintings or sculptures during the research, who owns these? Where will they be stored or displayed during the project and after the project completion date? Who decides? These questions are important to consider and resolve in the early stages of research projects. For our workshop participant who worked with communities to create visual memorials, questions about ownership were negotiated during the project:

> *I had to consider what should happen to the resulting mosaicked objects which were made in the design workshops. These are objects which participants spent time on and ultimately resulted in objects which were cherished. After the study, it was important to consider what should happen to them. Ultimately the decision was made to give each of the participants the mosaic that they created. However, as a researcher I asked if I could have them for the purposes of demonstrations, which seemed to be an effective compromise. Ethically, I believed that if my participants were using their own creativity in crafting objects that were meaningful to them, that they should be given the opportunity to keep them after the research.*

In visual research involving digital technologies, data such as photographs and video footage can be easily duplicated. On the one hand, this means that all those associated with a project can simultaneously possess the same material, making it easier to share ownership. On the other hand, researchers and participants may have little control over digital products being further replicated and used in ways that all participants may not agree with. If participants are able to keep originals or copies of visual material produced as part of a research project, then researchers could prepare and discuss mutually agreed protocols to clarify expectations. Copyright issues are important to consider. Researchers need to be aware of any legal requirements that govern ownership over visual materials, particularly when research data include 'found' images, such as photographs or videos posted on the Internet.

Representation and audiences

Perhaps more than any other research methods, visual research imposes questions about how data should be presented and in what contexts. Visual data can be displayed in a range of printed, film or digital formats. Sometimes images collated during a research project are displayed in exhibitions that participants and stakeholders are likely to attend. Each dissemination activity requires careful consideration and planning with respect to implications for participants, researchers, and audience(s).

The 'reality effects' of research refers to the ways in which research can contribute to reproducing the conditions that it purport to merely describe (Champagne, 1993 (English translation published 1999)). These risks are particularly acute for populations with devalued and stigmatized social identities. In these circumstances, images of communities and populations can have unintended effects of confirming rather than challenging the negative perceptions of audiences. Related to these issues, and as noted above, Langmann & Pick (2014) argue that visual researchers have ethical obligations to promote the dignity of participants when collecting and presenting visual data.

It is therefore critical when disseminating visual data to consider and plan for audience reactions. This is particularly important when conducting visual research with marginalized communities, where there may be a risk of (further) stigmatizing participants by sharing visual representations of their lives and experiences (Gubrium et al., 2014). One workshop attendee noted that despite careful efforts, researchers have limited control over how the visual products are viewed and interpreted by different audiences:

> *Ultimately we cannot as researchers take control of, or responsibility for, what will happen to images of people when they are viewed, because, both empirically and theoretically, we know that people imagine and tell their own stories with images. The best we can do is to make participants aware that this will happen.*

Representations that emphasize a common humanity, rather than what is different about others, can influence how audience members engage with the lives of others. Indigenous activist and scholar, Marcia Langton (2008) makes this point in relation to the graphic depictions of Australian Aboriginal suffering in the media that becomes a public spectacle, diverting attention from the social and political circumstances that contribute to ongoing problems of despair and violence. Researchers therefore have ethical obligations to consider how findings are communicated to wider audiences, and to understand the tactics needed when crafting messages for different audiences.

ISSN: 2040-5456

Audience members may copy and use visual research products in unexpected or unapproved ways, particularly when research findings are disseminated using social media or when participants themselves share visual data online. In these ways, visual research products can take on 'a life of their own'. One workshop attendee noted:

> *Some of the primary issues that I have encountered [include] uncertainty about audiences for the work and the need to identify early on in the research process what will be done with visual artefacts or artworks that result from the project (how they will be archived or for whom they will be displayed) versus spontaneity that often takes over as enthusiasm grows and plans evolve in unexpected directions, perhaps even resulting in total loss of control over images.*

Participants who generate visual materials during research projects are likely to be highly invested in shaping how this work is represented. However, participants may need guidance about how they can safely share the works they create. One of our workshop participants described a project in which young people from a marginalized community created digital stories as a way of exploring identity and developing digital literacy. Participants had the option of publishing their stories on the web, but the researcher found she was uncomfortable with participants' willingness to put personal information, including photographs, online:

> *Participants' preparedness to put their lives on show without the benefit of hindsight still makes me feel uncomfortable. Particularly, in relation to young people who are willing to include personal photographs or images that they may regret using in the future (even if they have provided informed consent).*

This example shows that ethical practice for researchers, particularly when using visual methods, extends beyond data collection. Researchers will not always be able to control what happens to the visual data collected during the research process, but care must be taken to ensure participants are aware of any risks involved in disseminating the material, even when participants themselves are responsible for the dissemination.

Conclusion

The six categories of ethical issues presented here were drawn from a larger project that aimed to develop guidelines to support researchers working across disciplines (Cox et al., 2014). Regardless of disciplinary background, researchers using visual methods need to understand potential ethical concerns and be aware of possible tensions and areas of uncertainty when using visual methods. Our aim in discussing these issues is not to be prescriptive, nor to warn researchers against using certain methods. Instead, we aim to encourage reflexive practice. This discussion of the issues demonstrates the shared learning that can be gained when researchers communally reflect on their experiences in dealing with the inevitable ethical and methodological complexities of doing visual research.

As in all social research, visual researchers must design projects that are methodologically robust and ethically sound, be considerate and careful at all stages of the research process, and remain alert to emerging and unanticipated issues throughout. Rather than focusing solely on ethical issues that can be identified at the outset of the research – that is, during the 'procedural ethics' process – we encourage researchers and members of ethics committees or review boards to engage in ongoing dialogue about emergent 'ethics in practice' issues. We believe much can be gained if researchers and ethics committees work together to identify and resolve issues as they arise. This practice of reflection and shared learning is important for all research involving human participants but, as this article has demonstrated, there are particular issues associated with visual research that necessitate particular care.

The growing use of, and expanded applications for, visual methods are pushing researchers and research ethics committees to both revisit familiar ethical issues and identify new ethical challenges. Accepted strategies for minimizing harm and promoting the benefits of research may need to be adapted and modified in visual research. The six categories of ethical issues we have identified are particularly relevant to visual research methods, but are by no means exhaustive, nor exclusive to visual research. In considering what ethical issues may arise we are mindful of the range of visual data available, such as photographs, video, video-diaries, portraits, and cartoons. Some issues will be more salient depending on what types of visual data are used and how those data are generated. Particular issues may be more prominent in research that uses pre-existing or found images, compared with researcher-generated or participant-generated data. It is important, too, to consider the different processes of creating material – that is, whether data are generated through individual or collaborative approaches and in what settings they are created and used.

We anticipate that the issues discussed here will evolve through ongoing reflection and practice in relation to visual research, as visual methods themselves continue to evolve and expand across disciplinary borders. Considering the profound impacts of visual culture and the growing necessity of digital literacy in everyday life, the future will likely bring even greater blurring between the practices of social research writ large and the use of images as a vital form of communication and self-expression. The need to critically examine and continually reflect on our ethical practices and commitments in research will, therefore, continue. We encourage visual researchers to document and share their stories from the field, allowing us all to benefit from the collective experience.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the participation and co-operation of the participants from the two ethics in visual research methods workshops, held in Melbourne, Australia and Wellington, New Zealand, which have contributed to the development of the six categories of ethical issues we have discussed here. We also acknowledge the financial contribution and support of the Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne. In particular, we thank the following workshop participants for allowing us to use quotes from their position papers: Marnie Badham, Katherine Boydell, Fran Edmonds, Suzanne Mavoa, Joji Mori, and Sarah Pink.

ISSN: 2040-5456

References

Bartmanski, D. (2014). The word/image dualism revisited: Towards an iconic conception of visual culture. *Journal of Sociology*, 50(2),164-181.

Bateson, G., & Mead, M. (1942). *Balinese character: A photographic analysis.* New York: New York Academy of Sciences.

Bombard, Y., Cox, S.M., & Alicia Semaka. (2011). 'When They Hear What We Say': Presenting Research to Participants and Communities. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics,* 6(3), 47–54.

Boydell, K.M., Volpe, T., Cox, S., Katz, A., Dow, R. et al. (2012). Ethical challenges in arts-based health research. *The International Journal of the Creative Arts in Interdisciplinary Practice*, Issue 11.

British Sociological Association. (2006). Statement of Ethical Practice for The British Sociological Association – Visual Sociology Group. Available from: http://www.visualsociology.org.uk/about/ethical_statement.php

Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2014). Tri-council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans.

Champagne, P. (1993 (English translation published 1999)). The view from the media. In P. Bourdieu et al (Eds.), *The Weight of the World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Clark, A. (2012). Visual ethics in a contemporary landscape. In Pink, S. (ed.): *Advances in Visual Methodology.* London: Sage.

Cox, S. and Boydell, K. (2015). Ethical issues in arts-based health research. In S. Clift and P. Camic (Eds.) *Creative Arts and Public Health: International Perspectives.* Oxford University Press.

Cox, S., Drew, S., Guillemin, M., Howell, C., Warr, D., & Waycott, J. (2014). Guidelines for Ethical Visual Research Methods. The University of Melbourne. http://vrc.org.au/guidelines-for-ethical-visual-research-methods

Edmonds, F., Evans, M., McQuire, S., & Chenhall, R. (2015). Digital storytelling, image-making and self-representation: Building digital literacy as an ethical response for supporting Aboriginal young peoples' digital identities. *Visual Methodologies*, 3(2), 98-111.

Gibbs, M., Meese, J., Arnold, M., Nansen, B., & Carter, M. (2015). #Funeral and Instagram: death, social media, and platform vernacular. *Information, Communication & Society,* 18(3), 255-268.

Graham, C., Laurier, E., O'Brien, V. and Rouncefield, M. (2011). New visual technologies: shifting boundaries, shared moments. *Visual Studies*, 26(2), 87-91.

Gubrium, A. & Harper, K. (2013). *Participatory Visual and Digital Methods.* Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Gubrium, A., Hill, H., & Flicker, S. (2014). A situated practice of ethics for visual and digital methods in public health research and practice: a focus on digital story-telling. *American Journal of Public Health,* 104(9), 1606-1614. doi: doi;10.2105/APJH.2013.3010

Guillemin, M. & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity and 'ethically important moments' in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), 261-280.

Harris, A. (in press). The ethics of researching images found online. In Warr, D., Guillemin, M., Cox, S. and Waycott, J. (eds) *Ethics and Visual Research Methods: **Theory, Methodology and Practice***. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Henderson, M., Johnson, N. F., & Auld, G. (2013). Silences of ethical practice: dilemmas for researchers using social media. *Educational Research and Evaluation: An International Journal on Theory and Practice,* 19(6), 546-560.

Howell, C., Cox, S., Drew, S., Guillemin, M., Warr, D., & Waycott, J. (2015). Exploring ethical frontiers of visual methods. *Research Ethics*, 10(4), 208-213.

Jordan, S. R. (2014). Research integrity, image manipulation, and anonymizing photographs in visual social science research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 17(4), 441-454.

Kelly, P., Marshall, S., Badland, H., Kerr, J., Oliver, M., Doherty, A., & Foster, C. (2013). An ethical framework for automated wearable cameras in health behaviour research. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 44(3), 314-319.

Langmann, S., & Pick, D. (2014). Dignity and ethics in research photography. International *Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 17(6), 709-721.

Langton, M., (2008). Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show. *Griffith Review*, 19, 143-159.

Liu, L.S., Huh, J., Neoghi, T., Inkpen, K and Pratt, W. (2013). Health vlogger-viewer interaction in chronic illness management. Proceedings CHI 2013, 49-58, ACM Press.

McLeod, K. & Guillemin, M. (2015). Adding the agentic capacities of visual materials to visual research ethics. *Visual Methodologies*, 3(2), 27-42.

Mori, J., Howard, S., & Gibbs, M. (2013). Designing in sensitive settings: Workshops to design a technology to commemorate Black Saturday. In Proceedings of the 9th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment: Matters of Life and Death (Article No. 13). ACM Press.

Nansen, B., Wilken, R., Kennedy, J., Arnold, M. & Gibbs, M. (2015). Domestic digital ethnography: Notes on methods and ethics. *Visual Methodologies, 3(2),* 86-97.

National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), Australian Research Council (ARC), Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (AVCC) (2007). National statement on ethical conduct in human research. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Nespor, J., (2000). Anonymity and place in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 6(4), 546-569.

Nutbrown, C. (2010). Naked by the pool? Blurring the image? Ethical issues in the portrayal of young children in arts-based educational research. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 17(1), 3-14.

Papademas, D., & International Visual Sociology Association. (2009). IVSA Code of Research Ethics and Guidelines. *Visual Studies,* 24(3), 250-257.

Phelan, S., & Kinsella, E. (2013). Picture this…safety, dignity and voice- ethical research with children: practical considerations for the reflexive researcher. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 19(2), 81-90.

Pink, S (2011) Digital Visual Anthropology: Potentials and Challenges. In: Banks M and Ruby J (eds) *Made to be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp.209-233.

Prosser, J., A. Clark, et al. (2008). Visual Ethics at a Crossroads. NCRM Working Paper. Manchester: ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.

ISSN: 2040-5456

Puurveen, G., Phinney, A., Cox, S.M., & Purves, B. (2015). Ethical issues in the use of video observations with people with advanced dementia and their caregivers in nursing home environments. *Visual Methodologies*, 3(2), 16-26.
Rose, G. (2012). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (3rd Edition), London: Sage Publications.
Rose, G. (2014) On the relation between 'visual research methods' and contemporary visual culture. *The Sociological Review*, 62, 24-46.
Schwartz, R. & Halegoua, G. R. (2015). The spatial self: Location-based identity performance on social media. New Media & Society, 17(10), 1643-1660.
Tilley, L. & Woodthorpe, K. (2011) Is it the end for anonymity as we know it? A critical examination of the ethical principle of anonymity in the contexts of 21st century demands on the qualitative researcher. *Qualitative Research*, 11(2), 197-212.
Van House, N. A., (2011). Personal photography, digital technology, and the uses of the visual. *Visual Studies*, 26(2), 125-134, doi: 10.1080/1472586X.2011.571888
Vannini, P. (2015). Preface to Participatory Visual and Digital Research in Action. Aline Gubrium, Krista Harper, Marty Otanez (Eds). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
Warr, D.J. (2004). Stories in the flesh and voices in the head: Reflections on the context and impact of research with disadvantaged populations. *Qualitative Health Research,* 14(4), 578-587.
Waycott, J., Morgans, A. (2015). Ethics in evaluating a sociotechnical intervention with socially isolated older adults. Qualitative Health Research, 25(11), 1518-1528.
Waycott, J., Vetere, F., Pedell, S., Kulik, L., Ozanne, E., Gruner, A., Downs, J. (2013). Older adults as digital content producers. In Proceedings CHI 2013 (pp. 39-48). NY: ACM Press.
Wiles, R., Prosser, J., Bagnoli, A., Clark, A., Davies, K., Holland, S., & Reynold, E. (2008). Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research. Southampton: ESRC National Centre for Research Methods.

Endnotes

1 For more information about this project see Harris, A. (in press).
2 For more information about this project see Edmonds et al, this issue.
3 For more information about this project see Waycott et al (2013)
4 For more information about this project see Kelly et al, 2013
5 For more information about this project see Mori, Howard & Gibbs (2013)
6 For more information about this project see Boydell et al (2012)

ISSN: 2040-5456